

# Power and glory await

## Carolina's focus on playoffs intensifies

By Herbert L. White  
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Brenston Buckner can't wait to get his hands on the Dallas Cowboys again.

The Carolina defensive tackle and his Panthers teammates host the 10-6 Cowboys Saturday at Ericsson Stadium in the first round of the playoffs. The Panthers (11-5), winners of the NFC South, lost to Dallas 24-20 earlier this season at Texas Stadium.

"We got a home playoff team against America's



Buckner

team," said Buckner. "I hope they get ready because Saturday night is going to be something special. My New Year's Eve is going to be Saturday night. That is when the apple drops for me."

"That is something that we want," safety Mike Minter said. "That is something that we are looking forward to and hopefully when we come out we will be fired up and ready to go. They are coming to our house this time so hopefully the outcome will be a little different. We get the opportunity to redeem ourselves and you don't get that opportunity too many times in life."

Carolina finished the regular season 11-5, the second best record in franchise history. The season marked a turnaround for the Panthers, who finished 1-15 two seasons ago. Carolina

Please see **PLAYOFFS/2C**



REUTERS PHOTO/RAY STUBBLEBINE

Carolina punt returner Steve Smith avoids a tackle by New York Giants end Darnell Dinkins en route to scoring a touchdown in the Panthers' 37-24 win last week in East Rutherford, N.J. Carolina plays Dallas Saturday at Ericsson Stadium in the first round of the NFC playoffs.

## Panthers good, but not quite ready for prime time



C. JEMAL HORTON

Now, this might sound blasphemous in a city that just went through a Flava Flav-ugly 1-15 season two years ago, but here's the hard, cold truth about the Carolina Panthers as they

enter the NFL playoffs this weekend:

That sweet 11-5 regular season the Panthers just put together doesn't matter. Those close games they won when it looked as if the team was done don't matter, either.

The Panthers are in some serious trouble this postseason.

First, they play Dallas on Saturday night at Ericsson Stadium to open the play-

offs. Let me be the 88,000th person to point out the Cowboys beat the Panthers earlier this season.

You don't believe that's in the Panthers' heads? Please. I'd bet money - if I had it - the Carolina players were begging for a first-round matchup with Seattle instead of Dallas. It doesn't matter that the Cowboys have struggled in recent weeks. Bill Parcells will have them ready for the playoffs.

And then there's the very big deal that Dallas is America's Team. For those of you who struggle with geography, Charlotte is in America. And that means that, among the supportive Panthers fans in Ericsson Stadium Saturday, there will be an overabundance of people cheering loudly for the Cowboys.

For a prime time game? If there's a true home-field advantage for Carolina, I'll

be surprised. That's not a Charlotte problem; it's like that everywhere Dallas plays. It's just like when Michael Jordan and the Bulls showed up at the Charlotte Coliseum back in the day.

Are the Panthers mature enough to overcome that kind of situation Saturday and turn into a team that puts teams away when it has to?

See **PANTHERS/2C**

### DELL CURRY SHOOTOUT

## With pros and colleges looking in, tournament takes a big time turn

By Herbert L. White  
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The Dell Curry Shootout has grown from a local basketball celebration to big time tournament in four years.

The three-day tournament, which gets underway Thursday at Charlotte Latin, is now a magnet for some of the nation's top high school players and teams. No one had an idea the Shootout would get so big so fast.

"The first one we started with eight teams and a one-day local tournament," tournament director Jeff Hood said. "Now it's compared to some of the most prestigious high school tournaments in the country."

The Shootout has evolved quickly, with three tournaments over three days. There's the national boys' and girls brackets as well as a local boys tournament. The national tournament alone boast three of the top players in the country:

- LaMarcus Aldridge, a 6-11 center from Seagoville (Texas) High who averages 27 points, 13 rebounds and 10 blocks a game;
- Randolph Morris, a 6-11 center at Landmark (Ga.) Christian School, and
- Juan Palacios, a small forward

from Our Savior American School in Long Island, N.Y.

As a result, college and professional talent evaluators will be on hand for the tournament, including the Charlotte Bobcats' scouting staff and GM/coach Bernie Bickerstaff.

"Today's high school player is tomorrow's stars," Hood said. "The Bobcats haven't seen LaMarcus yet, so they'll be there to get a heavy dose of him for all three days."

Charlotte Latin, which boasts Georgia Tech signee Anthony Morrow, will try to improve on last year's second-place finish in the boys' national tournament. The Hawks, who lost to Durham Mt. Zion in last season's national final, take on Seagoville in the first round Thursday at 8:30 p.m.

The girls' bracket is loaded too, with national No. 1 Bishop McNamara of Forestville, Md., No. 8 Victory Christian of Charlotte and No. 16 Riverdale Baptist of Upper Marlboro, Md., taking aim at the championship.

"Our national boys' tournament and girls will be very competitive," Hood said. "It's going to be cup runneth over with talent."



PHOTO/WADE NASH

Victory Christian (in white) is one of the national powers in the girls' bracket of the Dell Curry Shootout this week. The tournament at Charlotte Latin will feature three brackets and 24 teams. Play starts Thursday.



PHOTO/WADE NASH

HOMEcoming FOR PEARMAN: Former Charlotte Country Day standout Alvin Pearman rushed for over 100 yards in Virginia's win over Pittsburgh in the second Continental Tire Bowl.

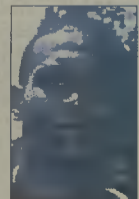
## Bulls DB killed in Christmas wreck

SPECIAL TO THE POST

Johnson C. Smith cornerback Nicholas Murray died in a car accident in his hometown of Darlington, S.C., Christmas morning.

Murray, who played with the Golden Bulls from 2000-03, was named All-CIAA twice and Daktronics All-South Region in 2002. He also led the nation in interceptions in 2002 with 10, a school record.

"It's a tremendous loss to the Smith family, the coaches and players," Bulls coach Tim Harkness said. "He was always one to bring people together."



Murray